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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: THE REMAKING OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING

REF: A. TBILISI 01382

[1](#)B. 08 TBILISI 2219

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Three seats on the public broadcasting board of trustees were filled on July 31 with remarkably little protest from within the parliament. The three men selected are generally highly respected for their objectiveness and better known for their sound academic work than for any political agenda. They replace members who resigned from the board complaining that GPB had not provided fair coverage of the opposition demonstrations that began April 9. Parliament appears to be working on changing the public perception of the board's bias by increasng the number of members from nine to fifteen and distributing the seats evenly between the parliamentary majority and minority.

A remaining unfilled seat will be reserved for a member of civil society. In addition to these changes, the parliamentary minority and civil society members are pushing to add more transparency and accountability by increasing the board's overall authority over programming and budget.

[1](#)2. (C) Sixteen candidates submitted applications for the recently vacated (ref A) top job of public broadcasting's director general, but only three were selected by public broadcasting's board of trustees on August 6 to be considered on a short list. The leading contender and ruling party favorite is current Deputy Director General Gia Chanturia. Chanturia's qualifications are generally well-accepted, some civil society members expressed concern over his lack of openness and his ties to the government. The open application process has been perceived as positive -- anyone may apply, but there have been calls to shed light on the actual selection process and televise the interviews between the candidates and the board of trustees which elects the director general. The board chairman has so far not acquiesced to that request. The board is expected make its final decision on August 10. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: There is a bull's-eye over the public broadcasting station and those associated with it. The station is the target for some of the harshest criticisms about the state of media affairs in Georgia because of its perceived pro-government bias and lackluster coverage of the opposition. Parliament's insightful choices for board membership and its new attempt to formulate a more inclusive board demonstrates GOG acknowledgment of problems with public television's programming and its willingness to act to change it. The GOG is making an attempt to quell the controversy surrounding the station by restructuring the board and selecting a new director general. Whether the GOG will take the reforms to the next level by increasing the board's authority and autonomy remains to be seen. End Comment.

SOMETIMES BORING CAN BE GOOD: NEW MEMBERS AND NEW STRUCTURE

[1](#)4. (C) Parliament elected three new members to the public broadcasting board of trustees: Davit Aprasidze, Zurab Davitashvili, and Davit Kandelaki. Though Aprasidze and Davitashvili were United National Movement party (UNM)

favorites, they are generally considered politically independent, neutral academics. Aprasidze is the Dean of the Philosophy and Social Sciences Faculty at Ilia Chavchavadze State University and hosted a respected political talk show at the public broadcasting station for over a year. The show stopped production in February 2008 and was a rarity among Georgian political programming as it had a reputation for objectivity. Aprasidze is a Fulbright Scholar Finalist for Objectivity. Aprasidze is a Fulbright Scholar Finalist for the 2009 academic year. Davitashvili is a former lawmaker from the UNM, but is more recently known for his academic work as the head of the International Relations Department at Tbilisi State University. Kandelaki is a documentary filmmaker recommended to the board by opposition MP Gia Tortladze from the Democratic Party of Georgia.

15. (C) If the GOG is making a concerted effort to fill the board with non-controversial figures, their plan appears to be working. There is an air of general indifference about the three new trustees -- civil society representative we spoke with appear to have no strong feelings in either direction on the three. Georgian Young Lawyer Association Chairperson Tamar Khidasheli told Poloff that the new members are "OK," but not very well known in the greater public arena. Khidasheli hoped they would choose board members that already inspired some measure of public confidence and that civil society would have had more of a role in the selection process.

16. (C) Parliament also passed the first reading of a draft amendment to the law on broadcasting to increase the number of board members from nine to fifteen. The amendment was inspired by a July 20 speech by President Saakashvili

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proposing to evenly disperse seats on the board amongst the different factions. Seven seats would go to the parliamentary majority, seven to the minority, and one to a member of civil society. The parliamentary minority says increased representation on the board is not enough, however, and called on the GOG to also increase the powers of the board. Eka Siradze-Delaunay (International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy), Ketu Khutsishvili (Open Society Georgia Foundation), and Khidasheli told Poloffs that currently the board sets a broad agenda but does not engage in day-to-day budgetary or programming decisions. These representatives hoped the board would perform more auditing functions to ensure the fiscal accountability of the station and increase its transparency.

VYING FOR THE TOP JOB

17. (C) Public broadcasting's director general position is still up for grabs after the resignation of the highly controversial Levan Kubaneishvili (ref A). Sixteen people submitted applications for the position before the open application period closed on August 3. Public Broadcasting's board of trustees short-listed only three for interviews. Among the leading contenders for the post is Gia Chanturia, the deputy general director at the station and the current acting director general. Chanturia ran for the position in 2008 and is known as the UNM candidate, but is seen as a somewhat controversial figure since using a pejorative term for homosexual in an on-the-record discussion about minority representation on public television with monthly magazine "Hot Chocolate" last January. Neither Chanturia nor the public broadcasting board attended an NGO-hosted public debate where twelve of the sixteen director general candidates were present. Khidasheli told Poloff she expects Chanturia to be elected, but that her organization is finding him very "closed." She went on to say that they have not been able to contact Chanturia and his office has not been as responsive as she would have liked. Khidasheli is, however, happy with the director general selection process.

18. (C) The other two candidates to make the second round

are Zviad Koridze and Giorgi Kacharava. Long-time journalist Zviad Koridze is making a second run at the position, having applied in 2008. Koridze is a well-known media figure, having sat on various newspaper editorial boards and having held the title of senior editor at various television stations. Giorgi Kacharava is a Georgian language film director. Erosi Kitsmarishvili, the former owner of Rustavi 2 TV and former Ambassador to Russia (ref B), failed to make the short list, with only one vote cast in his favor. A former close ally of Saakashvili and a leading voice during the Rose Revolution, Kitsmarishvili is now a staunch opponent of the administration. He started his campaign for director general on Facebook and told Poloff that he wants to take media in Georgia to "2013 - post Saakashvili" including the use of social networking sites and blogging tools like Twitter. While one of the most media-savvy candidates to apply, many worried that, if elected to the post, the public station would have been driven by Kitsmarishvili's own political agenda and not by objective journalistic standards.

19. (C) The three candidates short-listed were the only candidates to receive at least five votes from members of public broadcasting's board of trustees. The votes were cast by secret ballot and board members voted for as many of the candidates as they wished. The board of trustees will hold interviews on August 7-8. An internet petition initiated by a group of magazine publishers and journalists and signed by over 70 individuals asks that the interviews be televised in order to increase the transparency of the selection process. Board chairman Levan Gakheladze already denied the request stating that questions of a private nature may be asked and cameras would disrupt the working environment. A live debate with the three candidates will be held on August 7 on the public television station. The board is expected to name the new general director on August 10.

TEFFT